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THE FOUNDING OF THE STATE SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND—A BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM H. CHURCHMAN

BY GEORGE S. COTTMAN, Irvington, Indiana

If one interested in the notable men of Indiana should seek for information about William H. Churchman he would not find even the briefest biographical mention of him in any of the big gilt-edged books that pretend to save from oblivion the representative men of the State. Yet this man, an active citizen of the State for more than thirty-five years, in ability and in performance outranked many a one whose name is blazoned conspicuously on the pages of our history. William H. Churchman has never received the recognition and the honor that was due him, for the reason, perhaps, that his services were not of a kind to keep him in the public eye and he did not see fit to pay some publisher of commercial "history" for a laudatory write-up with the customary picture accompaniment.

An educator in a special field Mr. Churchman was to the blind of this State what Samuel Gridley Howe, "the Cadmus of the blind," or the famous educator of Laura Bridgeman was to the darkened ones of Massachusetts. He was, virtually, the founder of the work that has been done for this class in Indiana. For though such work was one of the predestined duties of a progressive commonwealth regardless of any one man, yet the intrusion of this man into our history at the formative moment gave a distinctive character to the early development. How this was can best be shown by a brief sketch of his earlier life. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1818, he lost his sight entirely during youth, and this determined the character of his life-work. He was one of the first pupils in the Pennsylvania Institute for the Blind, a pioneer school of the kind, and by the time he reached his majority he had taken up teaching of the blind as a profession. From that time until the close of a long life the rendering of service to those that sit in darkness was with him a pursuit and a passion. Between 1839 and 1848 he taught in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Tennessee and Kentucky. His first connection with this State was a matter of chance. In the spring

of 1844 James M. Ray, of Indianapolis, while attending the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church at Louisville, witnessed, by invitation, an exhibition of blind pupils from the Kentucky institution, under Mr. Church. Mr. Ray, who is honored in our history as a leader in all good works, was at once interested in behalf of the blind of his own State, and through his invitation Mr. Churchman during the next session of the Indiana Legislature, brought some of his pupils to Indianapolis to demonstrate what education had done for them. The Legislature was enough impressed to levy a tax of two mills on each hundred dollars' worth of taxable property to be applied in placing the blind children of the State in other institutions until a school should be established here. It should be added that the United States census reports did not show many blind children to exist in the State, and taking this as a basis the case did not seem to call for a very liberal provision.

At the session of 1845-6 James M. Ray and George W. Mears, in connection with the secretary, auditor and treasurer of State, were appointed to administer the funds, which, in the collection, proved to be enough to place twenty pupils in the nearest existing institutions at a cost of \$100 per year each.

A word as to the status of the blind at that period. They were wholly dependent—"a neglected, unhappy class," without hope of taking any part in the world's work, and with no prospect of being other than the veriest paupers if thrown upon their own resources. No other defective was quite so unfortunate. There were many things the deaf-mute could do, the victim of insanity, presumably, was at least less sensible of his misfortune; but the blind, unless specially trained, were pitifully helpless and were acutely sensitive to it. The champions of their cause saw for them possibilities of usefulness, independence and happiness, and with this incentive for zeal the trustees proceeded to carry out their benevolent duties, never doubting the eager co-operation of the beneficiaries, the only trouble they anticipated being in the selection of the fortunate twenty from the many applicants. Their first experimental step was interesting and educative. Through newspapers and by circular they advertised broadcast the "benevolent objects of the Legislature," and lo! as a result there were just five applicants. The trustees were "exceedingly disappointed," and on looking more closely into the matter learned that their experience was but a repetition

of what had occurred in other States, and that, as they concluded, "the affections of the mothers of the helpless blind required stronger assurances than your trustees could make in publication." before committing their tender charges into the hands of strangers. It is not the only instance on record when philanthropic zeal failed to reckon correctly with the human nature it had to deal with. In a word, not only the State Legislature and the public generally, but the proposed recipients of the benefaction had to be educated. In this dilemma the perplexed trustees turned to William Churchman as one who knew and could advise. He proffered his services, presented his plan, and with a horse, wagon and driver was put into the field to seek out and visit personally homes having blind inmates, and to create in such families ambition and confidence. Equipped with a specimen book printed in raised letters, and some samples of handcraft made by blind pupils of the Ohio institution, he traveled about 1,520 miles through thirty-six Indiana counties. This was in the early fall of 1846. The result was that the twenty pupils the State could then care for were found and placed, eleven at the Ohio institution and nine in Kentucky. Moreover twenty-eight others of eligible age were found, and the canvasser established the gross inaccuracy of the Federal census enumeration as regarded this class.

In 1847 the Indiana school for the blind was established with George W. Mears, Seton W. Norris and James M. Ray as trustees; W. H. Churchman as acting principal, at a salary of \$800 per year; L. S. Newell, teacher of music; Caleb Scudder, steward and master of handicraft; Samuel McGibben, assistant mechanic; Mrs. Margaret Demoss, matron and mistress of handicraft, and Miss Sarah Marsh, assistant. Mr. Churchman was made "acting" principal because, with all the confidence in him, there existed no precedent for fully installing a blind man in so responsible a position, and it was not until 1851 that the trustees so far overcame their conservatism as to appoint him superintendent in full. One of his first duties in his new capacity was to visit all the leading institutions for the blind in the country to inform himself of the latest improvements in methods of instruction and of administration, and also to select in person books and apparatus.

The beginning of the institution was on an humble scale in a rented building so scant in its accommodations that the trustees had

to put up a cheap additional structure for a workshop. The full list of the books for the blind at that time did not exceed thirty and the entire equipment of books and apparatus cost but a little over one hundred dollars. The total expense for the year was a little in excess of \$6,000. The term began with nine pupils only, but increased to thirty and established a record among the institutions of the country for the first year's attendance. Another promise for bigger things that year was the purchase for \$5,000 of the eight acres between Meridian and Pennsylvania streets still used, and which was then described as "adjoining Indianapolis on the north."

Mr. Churchman's first connection with the institution lasted until October of 1853, up to which period he did pioneer work in establishing a standard of excellence second to none. He advertised the aims and the efficiency of the institution throughout the State by several educational campaigns with his more advanced pupils through various sections, and, what was of vast importance from the viewpoint of efficiency and progress, he sought to keep before the public and the powers that were the peculiar problems of the work, particularly the industrial problems, as only an expert could do. He pointed out the fact that after the blind have been educated they still are not in a normal relation to the world or on an equal footing with those who see when it comes to taking actual part in the struggle for existence. He also paid much attention to the causes of blindness and published the statistics, forerunning in that direction the recent work of Dr. Hurty who, through the State Board of Health, has been ardently endeavoring to reduce blindness by showing where it is preventable.

Mr. Churchman may almost be spoken of as the father of the large building for the blind still standing. In its materialization much was left to him. After a thorough study of institutional buildings elsewhere he elaborated and personally supervised plans that were drawn for him by a local draftsman, John Elder. Subsequently the services of Francis Costigan of Madison, perhaps the best-known architect in the State, were secured, but Mr. Churchman kept track of every detail of construction, and tradition survives of his detecting mortar, imperfectly mixed, that was going into the walls, and of unsatisfactory bracings in the woodwork which he located as he traversed the rooms and halls tapping with his cane, and caused to be torn out and remedied. When completed

this building was considered one of the best and most modern structures of its kind in the country, and as nearly fireproof as the art of building had then attained to. Its cost was about \$68,000.

Just as this building was completed and the zealous superintendent with a fine equipment in hand, was ready to push and expand his work, "politics," it seems, decided that an \$800 position ought to be connected up with some one more valuable to the reigning powers. At any rate an old and vicious custom prevailed and for a party reasons a faithful public servant especially fitted for his important work, was summarily ousted and replaced by a series of incumbents who, no matter what their natural capacities, were so unadapted to the business in hand that the confession of ignorance by at least two of them was positively naive. Of course the institution continued to exist—even to grow, but one who carefully examines the reports of Mr. Churchman and his successors will find a fundamental difference which is the difference between an expert at his life's work and a novice at a temporary job. At various times we have rumors of defection within, criticism from without, and even of improper liberties taken by the superintendent with girl pupils. All that is scandal of the past, but it points its moral.

In 1861 Mr. Churchman was recalled to the superintendency of the blind and retained that position without interruption for eighteen years. The reiterated appreciation and praise voiced during that period by the various trustees with whom he worked was something more than perfunctory courtesy. One of the trustees's reports affirms that "to his zeal and ability and devotion to this work we are indebted for its superior condition and efficiency, ranking, as it does, as one of the first if not the best school for the education of the blind in the United States," and it further states that "his plans and ideas have been studied, copied and made the model for other and older States," while "his administration has been not only appreciated at home but recognized abroad." In 1866 the trustees of the New York State institution chose and elected him as the head of their establishment, offering him as an inducement a salary nearly double that which he received here, but at the earnest solicitation of our trustees he declined the flattering offer that had been thrust upon him and remained here. It was by his initiative that a convention of the educators of the blind, the second of its kind, perhaps, in the world, was held in Indianapolis in 1871. He was made chair-

man of its meetings, which were well attended from all over the country, and at the close a permanent association of "American Instructors of the Blind" was formed, with Mr. Churchman as one of the vice-presidents.

Mr. Churchman illustrated within himself to a remarkable degree the possibilities of the blind. Mentally he was no ordinary man. As a scholar his knowledge was extraordinary. As a thinker he was vigorous, searching and subtle, and the ease and clearness with which he could expound a profound and far-reaching subject was a matter for wonder to those less gifted. In his report of 1866 a long disquisition on the blind viewed largely from the angle of philosophy and psychology shows admirably the wide range of his mind, and from long training in dictation he expressed himself verbally with the same facility, as his friends well remember. Even more remarkable were his powers of minute observation and his mastery of facts and details. A little story is apropos here. The present writer's father, a merchant tailor in Indianapolis during the fifties, first met Mr. Churchman when he came into his store one day and requested to "see" some fabric for a suit of clothes. The skeptical tailor, with a touch of facetiousness, threw out a number of bolts on his counter, the two at the opposite ends being identical. The customer went along the line carefully feeling each piece of cloth till he came to the end, when he turned up his face attentively. Then he went back to the first bolt and fingered it once more. "Why," he said, "these two are just the same."

Mr. Churchman left the institution in 1879, and the last three years of his life were spent with his half brother, F. M. Churchman, whose home was six miles southeast of the city, and there he died very suddenly on May 17, 1882. His funeral services were held in the chapel of the institution with which he was so intimately identified, and the chief speaker was the Rev. Oscar C. McCulloch, than whom no one was better fitted to pay sympathetic respect to a strong and useful man.